No. 8

Observations

on

The manner of Living and Diseases of the Slaves on the Wateree River

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The climate of South Carolina I presume to be so generally well known, that any remarks on the subject in this essay, would be considered altogether superfluous.

It is a fact also familiar to many, that the "planters" in that state, particularly those owning lands on the larger watercourses, are, most of them, men of wealth, whose fortunes consists in Lands and Slaves. The principal article of produce which engages the attention of those planters, is the Cotton; this plant we know to require the strongest of land for its happy growth, and such land is to be found extending from the banks of the large creeks and rivers, to some one two, or even a greater number of miles into the adjacent country. The negro's who are engaged in the immediate cultivation of the cotton are necessarily exposed from morning until night in the atmosphere of a swamp, rendered

damp and foul by the exhalations from the vast number of stagnant ponds and lakes which are always to be seen in such situations, and also the effluvia arising from the banks of the river, as the water recedes in consequence of dry weather, or from previous increase from the fall of rain, which not unfrequently is in such quantity as to inundate the whole of the lowlands and blight the prospect of the planter

Nor are the slaves only exposed during the day, for when night relieves them of their toil they repair to little filthy huts, situated in general, on the very margin of the waters, and there in crowded numbers sink asleep Their food is principally indian meal with probably some little bacon or beef, the water of the river, which in the summer is always warm, and in the winter almost constantly muddy is their only drink, the most of them are well clothed —

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Thus far I have made but a statement of facts; and can any one look over them without asking the question, do not great numbers of those unfortunate beings find relief from their troubles, by the annual visitation of sickness and its consequences? or will I be credited when I assert that they enjoy as good health as any similar number of persons situated on our most healthy sand hills? however strange it may appear, it is not less true, and to account for it, may puzzle those of more experience than myself. Shall we say that it is the constant exercise which they take, and the simple manner in which they live that defends them from the exciting causes of diseases? these circumstances may have no little influence in contributing to their health but taken alone, they will not solve the problem; for occasionally some poor white man engages in the same business and lives with and like them, but no such person is ever known to escape an attack of fever. May we not then say that there is something peculiar in the

constitution of the blackman, which enables him to enjoy health in an atmosphere, where his master dare not venture, and urge this as a reason or submit it as an argument to prove they should be slaves; such an opinion it is true I have heard advanced, to prove the fallacy of which however I shall not recur to any reasoning on the subject, but merely state one single fact. Three gentlemen of my acquaintance made purchase of slaves brought from Virginia, amounting in number to about forty five; these were placed on three different plantations, with numbers of the former residents of those places, of this number scarce one single individual of the whole escaped sickness, and one third of them died during the first summer, and yet the older inhabitants were healthy.

As it is not my design to engage in speculation, I shall for the present attribute the fact to the benevolence of creative wisdom who, having given to man the privilege of living under almost any temperature, may not

does occasion a harmony between our system and the climate in which we live, be that either either salubrious or foul; and that while the greater portion of the slaves living in the swamps, die under five years of age, those who arrive at an adult age, as I said before enjoy as good health as any persons whatsoever; and even we to judge from the extreme old age to which many advance, we might say, that the air they breathe, so noxious to others, is to them a prop in the decline of life. And further, those slaves brought from Virginia and Maryland * who are so fortunate as to survive the first and second summers generally enjoy good health afterwards.

Were I to conclude here it might be inferred that I state the slaves working on the cotton plantations as altogether exempt from sickness; this however is far from my design, and when speaking of their health, it was with in an absolute manner but in contrast: for when we reflect on their exposure to all vicissitudes of weather

* It is well known that most of our slaves are brought

their filthy manner of living, and the foul air they breathe, and then take into consideration the number of diseases to be met with amongst them and the frequency of attacks, we are compelled to look upon them as a truly healthy ~~healthy~~ set of beings.

I will now mention some or most of the diseases to which they are liable, or rather from which they suffer, in doing which I deem it unnecessary to adhere to any particular classification.

By far the most common of the diseases is Fever, which assumes the form of either an intermittent or what we term the bilious inflammatory: the former of these may be viewed rather as a troublesome companion, than a dangerous enemy, but the latter is always severe and occasionally baffles the skill of the practitioner; either of these may assume a typhoid nature, but genuine typhus is at least a scarce disease, if it ever does visit the cabin of the negro. Bowel complaints are to be frequently met with, diarrhoea and dysentery

are very common, and why they are is easily accounted for; besides the extreme heat of the weather, and their exposure to its changes, our country abounds in fruit of all kinds during the summer months, which the negro's devour without any restriction as regards period or quantity; those diseases however I think very different in their nature from those so called and to be seen in the almshouse of Philadelphia as they seldom assume a chronic or typhoid nature or confine the patient more than a few days

From the affections of the pulmonary system they are not exempt, as colds, pleurisy and pneumonia; but of genuine phthisis I have never <u>heard</u> of a case, (I wish it to be recollected here, that I speak of the slaves on the plantations, and not of house servants, for I <u>once</u> knew a case and heard of another amongst negro's of the town.) and I would ask why should we? for their very manner of living, their food &c is amongst the most potent of remedies in this distressing complaint, we might therefore rationally infer that it would act also as a preventive; and

farther they live in situations particularly noted for the generating of intermittents, which according to late reports is the best climate for phthisical or consumptive patients.

Of the nervous diseases, few only are known by them, although we occasionally see cases of symptomatic tetanus and of Hysteria, and palsy in the aged; as to the diseases of the mind they are perfect strangers. Disappointments in love, in ambitious pursuits and many of those "sudden turnings" of fortune's wheel, which so frequently rob the master of his reason, do never affect the hard working slave; with them, love, or I should say marriage, is no speculative contract, neither have any thing to expect but the affection of their partner, and so soon as that affection dies, the contract is dissolved. And what I would ask can excite ambition in the slave? Nought that I know of saw a glimmering spark of hope for that liberty of which they are now deprived, it is true that this aspiring hope has cost some of them their lives, but so far as I know, it has not stolen from them any of their reason. This has been objected

to by some of my fellow students, on account of their having seen some few cases of mania in the Madhouse of Charleston; to them, I again reply that I am speaking of the slaves on the cotton plantations in the swamps of the wateree river, and not of the negro's of the city or towns in our state; for these taking advantage of the opportunities afforded them, may so improve the mind, as to be able to design and engage in plots, the disappointments in which may produce diseases that are altogether unknown by the plantation negro. I would here however beg an exception to this assertion, if we are to look upon credulity and superstition as diseases of the mind and not merely as symptoms of imbecility; for you can enquire of none of the negro's who cannot point out to you some "old witch" on the plantation, nor look at the door of a hut without seeing attached to it an old horse shoe to prevent or forbid the entrance of the evil genius.

And as regards their remedies in sickness, we again have proofs of their weakness, as they implicitly rely in many, which are too foolish to be mentioned here. Rheumatism I might have

mentioned as one of their occasional compan-
-ions, in a place more correct than the present;
but as I wished to mention one case of the dis-
-ease which may also prove their imbecility,
I have proposed deferring it until now. A prac
-titioner of my acquaintance, was called to
visit a negro fellow some few miles from town,
when he saw him he had a ligature around
each thigh, drawn so tight as nearly to impede
altogether the circulation; he said that "one of
his fellow servants had bewitched him, and
placed in his legs a number of crawfish, which
he was endeavouring to prevent from getting into
his belly", after much ~~pers~~ persuasion he took
off the strings, and in a few days was relieved of
his rheumatism; but he always afterwards viewed
with a cautious eye, the person who bewitched
him.

Thus I have mentioned <u>most</u> of the
diseases with which, he who practices on those
plantations may expect to contend, yet I have not
given in detail <u>every</u> one, from which the slaves
do sometimes suffer. In selecting this subject for

my essay, it was to shew the most prominent of the diseases to be met with amongst them, and more particularly to state the fact, that there is a number, in fact the most of those affections which when on established, terminate only with life, having continued from the dawn of medical science through all its progressive improvements to the present day, enrolled on the catalogue of the "aphrobia medicorum", diseases which destroy the pleasures of the studious and the wealthy, but which never visit the humble cabin of the slave, such for instance as mental derangements, gout, apoplexy, and consumption, a fact which so far as I know, wants an exception to make it a generally rule, I will now draw my paper to a close by making a few remarks on the interesting function of Parturition

That climate exerts a considerable influence over the uterine system, is I believed acknowledged by all; it is known that the inhabitants of warm climates menstruate comparatively at an early period of life, and that labour with them is a less serious operation than with those of a col=

=der region. What I have to say on this subject perfectly coincides with the above statement; for even the wealthy and dissipated portion of society, who enjoy the genial sun of South Carolina, perform this operation with but little difficulty, and the slave who unites with the advantages of climate extreme simplicity of life, and who are strangers to deformity, a difficult labour is truly of rare occurrence; and the following facts may shew how easy is the operation with them generally for I mention these not as astonishing cases, but, rather to prove the facility with which they bring forth their young.

A gentleman on whom I could rely informed me that one of his slaves, a girl about eighteen years of age, pregnant with her first child was "surprized by nature" when at work in a field a mile or two from the settlement, she made an attempt to reach her hut, but fatigue occasioned her to seek rest under a neighbouring tree, and whilst there, without any human assistance was relieved of her burden; the child she took to her house which

lived and was hearty, the girl went to her work in a few days. A practicioner of respectability related to me a similar case; he was called to visit a woman in labour four or five miles from town, when he saw her there was no symptoms of approaching labour, and after several hours delay he was induced to make examinations, when to his astonishment there was no child to be distinguished, the fact was, that the woman had delivered herself in the field and concealed her offspring which was dead, and had probably gone to bed to avoid work.

As might be expected the children are particularly liable to, and troubled with worms; and here I would say, that in the practice of of medicine the Melia Azedarach is not duly appreciated, for it is extensively used in vulgar practice with never failing success, in cases of the round worm; I believe its narcotic or noxious properties depend on or exists in the outer bark which should always be removed.

W. L. M.c